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## **SONGS OF THE SERBIANS**

**BY Dr. B. L. STEVENSON**

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## SONGS OF THE SERBIANS

By Dr. B. L. Stevenson — New York City.

Serbian national folk lore is receiving more than usual attention today because of the spirited fighting of its heroic little country. "I had no idea," says Havelock Ellis, "that Serbian legendary literature possessed splendour and charm of such unique quality," while Lord Curzon tersely remarks of Serbian ballads "sumptuous and interesting." A host of admirers numbering members of literary London, the Admiralty, cosmopolitan society and the ranks of organized learning acknowledge the beauty of the legends from the splendidly "fascinating, gallant little country" now fighting greater battles than ever in the days of old.

"Just as your *guslari* kept the natural language alive through dark days of persecution and misery" so the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries brought a renaissance of Serbia in song, Hugh A. Law has exclaimed in praise of the traditionary customs and beliefs belonging since time immemorial to the Serbians. "It is, I suppose," says the folk-lorist Gilbert Murray, "the best parallel now existing to literature from which the Homeric poems arose. Certainly the accounts one reads of the Serbian bards remind one of the Greek bards of the heroic age more than anything else I know."

Truly from out of the mythic ages the Serbian bard has come to say, "I am the people's heritage, I the soul of a day that has lain in the beginning of time, in the dawn of the age of man." And disentangled from entrapping years, shorn of itinerant drappings, emerges the Serbian concept of life adrift from Asia's hand, product of age-old alchemies, of fate, the soul, birth and the passing of days. Glorious the sun is conceived as provider, nourisher, and creator who daily weaving destiny, climbs the high-hung heavens where mountains do him honour and Time and the lesser gods dwelling in regions of snow, bow in servile subjection, recalcitrant acolytes in wondrous love of the sun. Equipped with such fancy is it strange that throughout Old Serbia odd customs of generating fire and heat prevail? Two young

children stript to the skin and undefiled are sent into a room apart to produce friction by drawing two sticks together, or fire is kindled in a big kettle and ladled out to the credulous peasants, one by one.

Of fire and the counterpart of good and evil, of light and darkness has the Serbian balladry sung, weaving the skeins of purity and vice, sex and sexlessness, masculinity and femininity with a dexterity marvelously prescient. Cabalistic, carnal and diabolic is the demon-lover who feeding on interred corpses represents the Slav's abhorance of vice, dechristianized limitlessly like the malignance of Indian Rakshasas. Vampires worm their way deep in the earth only to be detected by the presence of stainless black horses, alone at night in the churchyards. Exorcism, fetishism, and immolation seem to us Westerners to characterize a land where "pagan rites still survive, where vampires roam the meadows and *vilas* still wash their bodies on the banks."

That washing takes place at all in "the unsanitary peasant homes" as has been suggested by the zealous detractors of Serbian beauty, is remarkable. Yet *beauty*, says Arthur Pinero, *interest*, says A. Conan Doyle, and *heroism*, says Robert Bridges are unmistakably found in Serbian balladry. Perhaps these fanciful qualities are best detected in the vision which the Serb has had of that *chef d'oeuvre* of his imagination, the *vila*. A kind of muse, this creature baffles description — white like the morning star, pure like an early church Madonna, sensuous as a mistress, faithful as a sister, and as spiteful as a midnight witch, — the *vila* crowns the imaginative life of warrior Serbs. Swift footed to succor distress in battle, and quick to warn of danger, as that *vila* who upon the mountain Avala called aloud to Demetrius and Stephan to behold the plain of Belgrade so thick with Turkish tents that had raindrops fallen no water would have touched the earth, this type of fairy was the arbiter of the people's destiny and the protector of its happiness. Eager to heal the sick, their pale fingers caressing inexpressably compassionate the souls of men, these muses resemble nursing peasants of war-ridden Serbia today. Like the peasant women, too, they throw their weight on the side of warriors, and ride in the heavens Walküre-mad.

The Battle of Kosovo Cycle holds the most prominent place in the folk lore of this warlike Slavic country. Celebrating a historical event as it does, it serves in a yet greater degree to envisage national character and to give a concrete picture of the human characteristics which played the parts in creating the story. The list of separate songs includes such topics as:

- I. Knez Lazar Builds His Memorial Church at Ravanitsa.
- II. The Turks on Kosovo Plain.
- III. Sultan Murat Sends His Challenge to Tsar Lazar.
- IV. Tsar Lazar and the Tsaritsa Militia.
- V. Tsar Lazar Chooses the Heavenly Kingdom.
- VI. The Maiden of Kosovo and the Serbian Heroes.
- VII. Milosh Obilich Asks His Way to the Turkish Camp.
- VIII. The Quarrel between Obilich and Brankovich.
- IX. The Battle of Kosovo.
- X. Stephan Vasoyevich.
- XI. News from the Battle of Kosovo.
- XII. The Maiden of Kosovo.
- XIII. The Death of the Yugoviches' Mother.
- XIV. Sanctification of Tsar Lazar.

The separate stories play up to high motives of human action. The epic "Tsar Lazar Chooses the Heavenly Kingdom" is a case in point. Tsar Lazar, the ruler who about the end of the XIVth century fought so gallantly against the Turks was successful to the point of annihilating a great body of Turks near the river Toplitsa in 1387. Whereupon the Sultan Amurath gathering a large host of Asiatics marched against the Serbs on one of the largest plains in the middle of the Balkan Peninsula, the field of Kosovo — or the "field of blackbirds" as it is called. Thereupon was foredoomed the eventual conflict which was to be presented to the Serbians, a choice between earthly rule or heavenly approbation. Tsar Lazar in being called upon to choose between the victory of his troops or the hope of inheriting Heaven is virtually face to face with a situation similar to that which our Lord met when He renounced the delights of this world for life Eternal. The poem runs:

"Flying comes a gray-like bird, a falcon,  
 From the Holy City, Jerusalem,  
 And a little swallow seems to carry —  
 —No, 'tis not a gray bird, not the falcon,  
 But it is the Holy Saint Elijah  
 And no little swallow is he bringing,  
 But a letter from God's Blessed Mother,  
 He bears it to the Tsar on Kosovo,

.....  
 "O Tsar Lazar, thou of glorious line,  
 Between two Empires which one wilt thou choose?  
 Dost thou desire the Kingdom most of God?  
 Or dost thou choose the Empire of this World?

.....  
 And when the Tsar had listened to those words,  
 The Tsar the question ponders o'er and o'er;  
 'Dear God, what shall I answer, how decide?  
 Upon which Kingdom shall I set my choice —  
 Shall I most desire the Heavn'ly Kingdom?  
 Or shall I choose an Empire of this world?  
 If that I, in choosing either Kingdom,  
 Should earthly Empire above all, desire —  
 The earthly Kingdom is a little thing;  
 God's Kingdom is forever and for aye.'—  
 The Tsar will'd for the Kingdom of the Lord,  
 Rather than the Crown of worldly Empire... (1)

Likewise a moral conflict is portrayed in the epic "Tsar Lazar and the Tsaritsa Militsa," in which Militsa, regretting the loss of the scion of her race, entreats all her male relatives to withhold participation in the Battle of Kosovo, only to be answered by each separate hero that bravery called to Kosovo, come what may to the perpetuation of the line.

But of all the Kosovo Songs, one stands out pertinently picturing a mother in Israel, as one might say. The Yugo-viches' mother praying for news of the battle in which are her nine sons and her husband, the great Yug Bogdan, asks for falcons' eyes, and the wings of swans to take her to the battle field. There she finds the nine dead heroes with their

(1) Quoted from the translation made by Prince Lazarovich-Hrebelianovich, *The Serbian People*, vol. I, p. 398. (1910)



nine spears stacked above and their nine warrior horses waiting. With heart like stone she takes the horses back to her castle with her to bear in heavy silence her grief with her daughters-in-law. Not until the arrival of a falcon from the battle field bearing the dead hand of her son, does she break down and weep, and then only as she dies.

"God adored! What a mighty wonder —  
 When the army on Kosovo gathered!  
 In that army, nine were sons of Yugo,  
 And tenth was old Bogdan, great Yug Bogdan.  
 The Yugoviches' mother prayed of God,  
 That the eyes of falcons' God would give her,  
 And white wings of the swan, she prayed He'd give,  
 That she might fly to far Kosovo Plain,  
 And might see there the nine Yugoviches  
 With them, the tenth, the great old Yug Bogdan.

.....  
 Dead, she finds, there, the Yugoviches nine,  
 And tenth of them, old Yug Bogdan lay dead!

.....  
 But that mother's heart set hard like stone,  
 And from that heart no tear fell down.  
 Instead, she takes the nine good horses there,  
 .....  
 And to her Castle white, she then goes back.  
 .....

When it was light, the hour of new-born day,  
 Two vultures come a-flying, raven black,  
 .....

They carry a dead hand, a hero's hand,  
 And on that hand there glows a wedding-ring.  
 Into the mother's lap they throw it.  
 .....

Then Damian's mother takes the hand up,  
 Turns it over, strokes it, and plays with it —  
 Whisp'ring to the hand, she stammers starkly:  
 .....

'Here in my lap, 'tis here, that thou didst grow!  
 Torn from the tree wert thou — on Kosovo!  
 That sob of death, lightly her soul set free.'(1)

(1) *Idem ib.* p. 402.

The significance of this tale is detected in its personal stoicism and its symbolism, considered an allegory of the nine Nemanya Kings and their mother, the old Serbian Kingdom.

The nationalistic idea of old Serbia alive in the new is most remarkable in these poems. It has been the centrifugal force which has kept the Serbians a nation. Exposed to the impact of alien civilizations, this central fact of existence, the creation and the recitation of the songs, has preserved nationalism and repelled the disruptive forces of dispersion. Embracing India, Greece and Babylon as it does and reflecting Germanic, Roman and Gaelic kinship, Serbian literature yet stands forth singularly unique, the echo of a people's genius, cultured by Vuk Karadzich, to whom belongs the honour of being creator of his nation's tongue and the collector of tales which before him were the common possession of the singing heart of bard and peasantry. Although the published epics appeared early in the nineteenth century, the greatest notice was taken of them in 1823-33 when Karadzich brought out his monumental work. In 1868 Avril succeeded in bringing the Kosovo epic particularly before the notice of the cultured world by publishing "*La Bataille de Kosovo*." Petranovich included this same epic in his collection of 1867; Vuk Vrchevich and M. Miloyevich helped to popularize it. The critics, on their side, have seen in this cycle a Homeric epos, the product of a South Slav (and therefore Byzantine Slav) in contrast to North Slav productions. The invariable decasyllabic verse, the rhythmic declamation and the fragmentary motiving suggest the creative power of an age-old people. There is no fixed fall or tonality, and the caesura occurs after the fourth syllable. The critics have fully analysed text and content: Hilferding and Miklosich, diagnosing Vuk's text and Pavich, Sviloyevich and Yurishich Yanko finding Dalmatian and Ragusan marks in the songs. But like all academic questions, a tendency to argue to futility is hardly to be avoided. Whatever criticism says the main point remains that the epos gives a glowing picture of the life and spirit of the people and as such is to be revered.

Yet although uniquely Serbian, "in the folk tales we find striking traces of contact with the Turk, and through him

with the Arab,"(1) traces which recall such historic events as the Hellespont crossing and the misrule of the Turkish viziers. Forceful enrollment of strong young Serbs for the janissary band was a feature as common to Turkish exploitation of Serbian lands as the abduction of fair maidens for the delectation of sultan's seraglio. "Yet it must not be thought that these Serbian tales have no originality, no character of their own; there is about them a sturdy morality that is certainly not Oriental,"(2) as for instance a tale is told at Istamboul of a Serbian hero, Kralyevich Marko, who even champions the cause of a Turkish maiden against an amorous Moor. Dowered with gifts but piteously sad is the maiden whom Marko, seeking to comfort, frees from the power of the hateful Moor, by shattering to earth his powerful antagonist astride the mare Bedevia. Tales of the peasants though, at times overlaid with evidences of fierce brutality, yet show in the refinement and delicacy of their telling the unmistakable mark of the East. Heavy ornamentation and sickly sweetness obtrude as foreign traces; the tassels and tamborettes, pavillons and silken flags are as Turkish as the golden drapery, the nuptial robe flecked with gold, the costly wedding shirts and the bootfuls of ducats are Venetian. Perfume and minarets signal the menace of a foreign cult which although artistically pleasing was, when assuming an intermingling of religion, abhorrent to the Serbians who sensed behind the Turkish fez, the javelin and the yatagan relics of a torpid day, of faithless Pashas, of black midnight secrets of houris and other Stamboul fancies — the comingling of dead flowers, ikons and rose dust.

For quite pure as the tone of a bell is the Serbian strain of religious feeling; compact of the sound of chimes, masculine intonation, the scent of incense and the sight of basil flowers powdery white against the gold of the ikons, it calls up an aroma of chastity, asceticism and rigorous formalism. The odour of monastery life, rendolent of mists which rise at dawns, suggests long fasts at Christmas and at Easter time in monasteries high up in cloud-draped mountains, where riverlets dash swiftly by and the woodlands seem always intently listening, or the muted moods of the

(1) Quoted from private letters addressed to W. M. Petrovitch upon the appearance of his *Hero Tales and Legends of the Serbians*. (1914).

(2) *Idem*.

midsummer fasts when bees hum in tall languorous grasses and chimes peal over fair fields in which flowers hide their black roots creeping under soil. The church is often quoted as a retreat from persecution and from wicked aggressors; such is told of the unhappy death of Yelitsa whose body bound to the tails of dashing horses fell to earth on a desert spot where eventually rose a noble church, walled of marble, vine-entwined.

To forget faith and embrace Islam was ever the coax of insidious luxury to the Serbians. And how foolish sounds a warning against embibing a beverage prepared from forest plants and flowerets which might cause transformation to the life of a libertine, involving the wearing of scarlet velvets, opening secret cupboards and taking forth golden gowns with silky trains and long flowing sleeves. Stephan Yaksich, in entreating the Turk for his bride "more beautiful than the white *vila* herself," made a profound obeisance and kissed the slipper and knee of the Sultan. For love of opposite sex not only were coarse fur caps and heavy cloaks discarded, but finely tempered swords and sabres studded with diamonds as big as maidens' eyes were brandished by gallants who "shone on the verdant fields like setting sun behind the forest" as they waved on flagpoles adorned with golden apples, the sign of the great glistening cross. And journeys far in bridegroom interest have been undertaken over paths now placarded with every war news story. *Wanderlust* and travel longing were far from lying dormant in the Serbian Gaelic heart blood. From the mountains to the plain, from high Miroch to yon Zagorye, from the Banat to Bulgaria, from proud Venice to Vienna, from the church at Tekiya over 'cross the river Timok, tsar and bridgroom, gilded coaches Arabian coursed have by custom long since travelled. Even today on the level plains of Zhablyak, and the pleasant lands of Morava where the shepherds sleep at noonday, and the men of Podgoritsa gather, one can hear recited the elemental stories of the nation's long gone past. The waving grasses linger, and the goatherds sprawling, tending horses idly drinking, tell pleasant tales of goats and shepherds, flocks that saunter in the sunshine of the mountain's blazing noon-tide, lyric lays that chant in chorus of dire chances befalling lambkins. All the fragments then that nestle deep in hollows of man's memory are thus living in the present like the undulating grasses springing on the downs in Serbia.



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